

Montgomery County may seize former Beech-Nut plant

By [Kyle Adams](#) December 30, 2015



ERICA MILLER

The former Beech-Nut plant in Canajoharie, as pictured today (Dec. 30, 2015).

Montgomery County is exploring foreclosure on the former Beech-Nut plant in the village of Canajoharie after three years of unpaid tax bills and stalled demolition plans.

The shuttered baby-food factory has lingered unused at the entrance to the village since Beech-Nut Nutrition Corp. moved its operation to the [town of Florida](#) in Montgomery County more than four years ago, taking more than 300 jobs and 10 percent of Canajoharie's tax revenue with it.

The two owners in the intervening years have not paid village, county or school property taxes, according to officials, resulting in a \$573,000 outstanding tax bill.

Now that three years have passed without payment, the period required by state law before foreclosure can begin, the county is conducting a preliminary environmental review and preparing to enter a more in-depth review before moving forward.

"At that point we'll turn everything over to the county Legislature and the county attorney to decide what to do with that property," said Kenneth Rose, CEO of the Montgomery County Business Development Center.

The initial review is a "desktop" study of former uses, accident reports and other filings, Rose said. The second phase, which he hopes to begin in the spring, would involve an on-site study.

Rose said he has not seen the results of the Phase One study to know what kind of contamination might be present, but Mayor Francis Avery said by one estimate there could be as much as 80,000 pounds of asbestos in the main manufacturing facility.

In 2014, former owner Todd Clifford, general manager of TD Development LLC, began and stopped asbestos remediation at the property multiple times. He said today that the contractors repeatedly failed to meet state requirements, resulting in the state Labor Department shutting down the operations.

Clifford said he bought the property in December 2013 for \$200,000 on the advice of apparent business associate Jeff Wendel. He then sold it in January 2015 to Wendel, who still owns it under the name TD Development, Inc.

Wendel did not respond to requests for comment today .

Clifford admittedly refused to pay the roughly \$500,000 annual tax bill, saying today that it was more than the entire value of the property. In early 2014, Clifford said he planned to challenge the \$9.4 million assessment that dated to the Beech-Nut days.

It's not entirely clear what happened after that, but the taxes didn't go down, and Clifford sold the property. He said he was promised a reduction and never saw one; Avery said he was not aware of any agreement made to lower the taxes despite some discussion.

Clifford said he initially had planned to demolish the buildings and develop the property into a retail site.

"There was really no way to develop it, to make a financial go of it, not with the taxes at half a million dollars a year," he said today.

While he owned the building, it was stripped of most of its valuable copper and other metal, and Clifford said the site was broken into and burglarized repeatedly.

The Canajoharie Police Department could not immediately verify Clifford's claim.

If the county gains ownership of the property, Avery said he'd ideally like to see it "flattened" to make way for new development.

The site, which includes the factory and multiple warehouses, sits on about 26 acres just off Exit 29 on the Thruway, with existing connections to water, sewer, gas and electricity.

"That makes it a highly attractive site once it's remediated and the buildings are taken down," Rose said.

If the county decides not to foreclose on the property, Avery said, he's not sure what the village's next move will be.

"Eventually, it has to come down," he said. "We're just in a holding pattern right now waiting for Montgomery County to do their due diligence."

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